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ABSTRACT

The topic of grade inflation, the awarding of too many "A's" and "B's", is frequently mentioned in the literature on higher education. Many educational philosophies have suggested ways to evaluate students fairly. Some professors have used the bell-shaped curve as a model, giving grades according to the normal distribution curve regardless of the quality of students in the class. There are many reasons why this does not work well, and the practice may result in too many students getting poor grades. Portfolios have become an increasingly common way to evaluate the achievement of college students. As a purposeful collection of knowledge and products or skills of the student, the portfolio may contain several types of materials. They have the advantage of revealing connections to what has been learned, rather than the demonstration of achievement in isolation. Subjectivity is involved in grading no matter the approach taken. Even the term "grade inflation" is subjective. However, each university instructor needs to be accountable and fair in giving grades to students. (SLD)

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Grade Inflation in Higher Education

Marlow Ediger

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GRADE INFLATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Abstract

The topic of grade inflation or university instructors giving too many A's and B's is mentioned frequently in the educational literature in higher education. Numerous philosophies have been presented by measurement and evaluation specialists in terms of how to grade students fairly and equitably. The writer will attempt to clarify each philosophy.

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Faculty members in higher education may receive notices from the Dean of Instruction pertaining to grade inflation. Thus, the communique may read, in effect, that grades should be lowered. But, which standards should be used to adjust grades to where "they should be?"

Using the Bell Shaped Curve

The bell shaped curve, also called the normal distribution curve, has been used by selected professors as a model. Thus, no matter what the quality of students is in any class, the following grades will be given in terms of standard deviations:

One standard deviation above and below the mean or classroom average score will contain 68.26% of the total. These would receive C grades. For example, with thirty students in a class, about 21 would receive higher and lower C grades. One standard deviation above the mean, containing 13.54% of the total number of students would receive B grades whereas one standard deviation below the mean, would secure D grades. Two standard deviations and higher, 2.54% of the total students, would receive A grades and two standard deviations below the mean secure F grades. This is a stringent way of grading students. Most professors would loosen up a little and give more A, B, and C grades for the following reasons:

1. The class of students do not represent a bell shaped curve.
2. Too many students would fail in school, especially if a B average is required for graduation.
3. Bad public relations would accrue with too many students receiving low grades.
4. No matter how much effort is put forth by a student, a certain percent receive low grades as well as high grades.
5. Admission standards with the SAT and secondary school grade point averages (GPA) may be high for university admittance and then further culling comes from grades received in higher education
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classes.

There are additional reasons why the normal distribution (bell shaped curve) does not work in grading university students:

1. Tests are not that valid and reliable.
2. Tests, if pilot studies were run, would have a rather high standard of error.
3. Tests generally contain multiple choice items. These items are isolated in knowledge from each other, with no clues ideally provided for the next sequential multiple choice test item. In the everyday world, in contrast, knowledge is perceived as being related in order to solve problems.
4. Tests do not reflect the real world of work, skills, and doing. A person is not tested at the work place to determine how well he/she is achieving. Rather, the actual work output is considered in the assessment process.
5. Tests cannot and do not predict how well the test taker will do in the world of work. Test results attempt to measure what a student knows at a given time. No emphasis is placed upon success in future life's endeavor (Ediger, 2000, 244-249).

Portfolios for Grading Students

Portfolios have become increasingly common in their use to appraise university student achievement. Each student develops his/her own portfolio. A portfolio is a purposeful collection of knowledge and products/skills of the involved student. The portfolio may contain the following:

1. Written products of the student's narrative, expository, and creative course writings.
2. Snapshots of artwork, construction projects, and dioramas made as a class project.
3. Cassette recordings of oral reports.
4. Video tapes of committee endeavors.
5. Summaries of important knowledge and skills achieved.

As compared to mandated testing of students, portfolios differ in the following ways:

1. They are more holistic in that an overview of student achievement is shown.
2. They reveal connections pertaining to what has been learned, not isolated entities.
3. They empower students in that the latter select portfolio entries.
4. They are internally developed by the student, not by external test writers.

5. They can be used to show specific progress of a student to parents.

6. They are contextual in that the entries in the portfolio relate to what was done previously as a learning opportunity.

7. They show the every day work of a student, not a test score.

8. They may be used readily for diagnosis and remediation, not at a more distant time when test scores are released.

9. They are an inherent part of the student's progress, not an externally devised percentile.

10. They may be rubric scored to secure a numeral to indicate student achievement. However the rubric score may lack reliability by those doing the portfolio assessment.

Disadvantages of the portfolio are the following:

1. They may be voluminous to assess.

2. They are time consuming to evaluate and cannot be machine scored.

3. They do not contain percentile rankings, which are common to mandated tests.

4. They take time to communicate student achievement in that much reading needs to be done to notice achievement.

5. They are expensive to assess since qualified assessors need to do the evaluating of each portfolio. To burden instructors with the additional work of assessment is not realistic (Ediger, 1996, 34-40).

Present Grading Systems of University Students

At the present time, each professor in a course gives a single grade to students, such as A, B, C, D, or F. Pluses or minuses may be added, such as a B+ or B-. Professors differ much on how stringent to grade each student's achievement in class. There are professors who give A or B grades only, to students having completed a course. Others may add a few C grades. Grades of D & F appear to be given very infrequently.

Notices may come from the Vice President in Charge of Academic Affairs to professors for the latter to give lower grades. The author remembers clearly when the Academic Dean of Instruction visited a Division of Education meeting to state that grade of C is average. The fallacy in making the argument was that it took a B average to graduate with a Master's degree. Thus, it may well be that "C" is referred to as the average grade, but this same grade was failing when averaging the grades for a student to graduate.

There are diverse variables to consider when professors grade students. These variables among others, include the following:

1. Does the class of students represent a normal distribution or do students represent a skewed distribution with many high achievers or many low achievers. By checking the grade point average of the total class (university grades or high school grades for freshmen), one can obtain an estimate of previous student academic achievement.
2. Do student class test scores pile up at the top or at the bottom? Is there a bi-modal curve? If student test scores are skewed positively or negatively and are close to each other, the professor may have difficulty in justifying a wide dispersion of grades from A to F. The standard error of measurement of the involved test will be too great to warrant the spreading out of grades from A to F.

If there is a bi-modal curve from student test scores, then there might be two "bell shaped curves." One curve represents the higher test scores while the other encompasses the lower scores. Basically, there is no mean or average from the totality of student test scores in a class. It may be that the higher scores are close together and warrant a single grade whereas the lower test scores of the bi-modal curve may be somewhat or completely dispersed. The latter could then be spread out more in terms of grades to be given to students. There will never be a perfect bell shaped or bi-modal curve, for various reasons:

(a) University students in a class rarely, if ever, represent a normal distribution, nor will students ever come in a perfect bi-modal curve.

(b) Students have strengths and weaknesses in different academic areas. Generally, a student should do well in course work relating to his/her major, more so than in selected academic disciplines where interest, strengths, and perceived purpose are lacking (Ediger, 1999, 233-240).

Closing

Grading students is a human, not a scientific creation. There is subjectivity involved in grading no matter which procedure is used. If each instructor gives perceived grades for a class of students, then anarchy in grading is in evidence. Perceptions due differ in terms of how many A's, B's, C's, D's and F's to give. Composition differs as to how many in a class are high achievers, or lower achievers, as compared to other classes of students in course work taken.

Attempting to grade, using a bell shaped curve would, no doubt, reduce grade inflation, but there are serious problems here. Students in any class are not represented by a bell shaped curve. University students represent a special set, since culling has previously been done through drop outs in high school, graduated students from high school who do not prefer to go on to higher education, university admittance policies pertaining to GPA of high school graduation, as well as ACT/SAT scores. As university students proceed in higher education, additional students drop out along the way for various reasons such as financial, personal, low GPA, among others. This leaves the university instructor with subjective reasons in how to do rational grading. The term "grade inflation," too, is subjective. How wide should the straight and narrow gate be opened for A and B grades provided to students? Best it is, in the thinking of the author, to let each instructor be the master of his own fate in grading students. Even a teaching team of a class may have wide disagreements on how strict or flexible grades are to be issued to university students. Sometimes, a team member is inflexible and may do all the grading of students.

Each university instructor needs to be accountable and fair in giving grades to students.

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